

Northern Forest Canoe Trail

Signage Handbook

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Signing the Northern Forest Canoe Trail

In many ways, NFCT signs are the face of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. The NFCT sign system provides a consistent identity for the trail as it passes through the four states and varied landscapes. We hope to provide paddlers with limited, adequate, and high-quality information. One challenge of signing a trail is to develop a consistent identity without standardizing the visitor's experience from end to end. Signage must be carefully designed, installed, and maintained to function effectively without degrading the landscape or the visitor's experience.

Along with natural and historic features of the land, the people and way of life of the Northern Forest make paddling in this region an exceptional experience. Those people include neighbors, paddlers, business owners, visitors, town officials, and other stakeholders. Signage must meet the needs of all these people. Each of them is an audience NFCT signs must speak to and serve.

On trailhead kiosks in gateway communities, local information panels will connect paddlers and visitors to local products and services. We hope this signage will contribute to local economic development and increase communication about the trail and local services.

The messages for these audiences also will need to minimize conflict among users and residents through education and clear expectations for behavior. Advisory signs will direct users to campsites, water, food, transportation, and services to avoid misunderstandings. Beyond logistics, interpretive signs will educate visitors about local history and attractions to enhance appreciation of the Northern Forest and the trail.

NFCT signs will:

- Identify points of access to and from the trail;
- Promote awareness of the trail and interest in using it;
- Identify portage ends and campsites;
- Guide portaging paddlers along trails;
- Explain basics of safe and minimum-impact travel;
- Provide contact information for local paddler services and facilities, including emergency services; and
- Note and interpret the natural, historic, and cultural features of the trail corridor.

The NFCT *Signage Handbook* will be the source of sign design standards, policies, and practices for canoe trail volunteers and staff.

About the Northern Forest Canoe Trail

A. The Nonprofit Organization

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail is a 740-mile water trail stretching from Old Forge, New York to Fort Kent, Maine. The trail was formed to renew the bonds between people and rivers in the Northern Forest of New York, Vermont, Quebec, New Hampshire, and Maine by reestablishing a long-distance recreational water trail along Native American and historic travel routes. The trail will be a living reminder of the history and heritage of this region and provide an opportunity for people to experience the Northern Forest landscape.

The idea for the trail came in 1976 when three men began researching the old canoe routes of the Northern Forest. By retracing the routes, portaging along roads and railroad beds, through towns and cities, and around milldams and waterfalls, they found that a viable water route still connected the Adirondacks and northern Maine. In the ensuing years, they paddled, poled, and portaged what was to become the Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT).

The nonprofit organization Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT) formed in 2000 to create and maintain the trail. The group works with community groups, volunteers, and its members to create, manage, and maintain the route and to tell the rich historical and cultural stories of northern New England, where rivers were once the highways and routes of communication.

In ten communities along the trail, NFCT has identified a community organization, such as a regional planning commission, community action council, or development council, to be the sponsoring organization for a segment of the trail. NFCT hopes for the involvement of the more than 40 communities through which the trail passes.

Like most long-distance trails, most NFCT paddlers will visit only parts of the trail; there are sections to suit most any level. Paddling the entire trail takes six to eight weeks and requires all the skills a canoeist can muster. Flat water, whitewater, portaging, poling, both upriver and down, the traveler will need to handle it all.

B. The Route

Paddling a historic 740-Mile Waterway through New York, Vermont, Quebec, New Hampshire, and Maine

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail links the watersheds of northern New England and the Adirondacks by following the historic settlement patterns through the rivers of the region — from the Native Americans to the early settlers, through the development of mill towns and the timber industry to today's issues involving changing ownership of large tracts of land. The trail will be managed and maintained by local community stewardship organizations and volunteers in cooperation with the nonprofit NFCT.

The trail passes through nearly 40 towns and cities, national, state, and town forests and parks, and private lands. Winding through landscapes that are remote, rural, and even urban, the route traverses wilderness and communities that are home to people and wildlife. Some trail sections are popular and heavily used; other areas see little use. While signs are necessary in a

trail system, the NFCT strives to respect the land and the people who live there while making it clear that paddlers are responsible for traveling with minimal impact on the land, other visitors, and residents.

The NFCT is not a wilderness trail. There are wild areas of great beauty, but much of the trail passes through developed areas. There are no plans to change the nature of the landscape of the route. Were it not for the towns, mills, working forests and farms along the way, the trail could not exist. Only minor clearing of some of the portages will be done. A traverse of the NFCT is a journey through the course of history in the Northern Forest. What you see along it is indicative of what happened; history unfolds before you.

Although in many sections, campsites and signage must be installed, the entire 740-mile length of the NFCT is passable. It connects, or has access to, every major drainage in the northeast and traverses a diversity of waterways, each historically significant to the region's development. The trail is a living reminder of the history and heritage of the Northern Forest and its people, be they business, educational, or recreational users of these waters.

Northern Forest Canoe Trail maps and a full route description are in Appendices F and G.

C. Roles of Local Volunteers and NFCT Staff

Partnerships among public and private organizations and individuals are essential to the creation and stewardship of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. NFCT staff will provide administrative support, coordination, and access to resources for the local stewardship committees. It is at the local level that on-the-ground decisions and action takes place.

Local partners, in cooperation with NFCT staff, will decide whether and where to have signs. They will also compile text and images for advisory and interpretive signs, and obtain permissions and permits for installation. Local volunteers will be responsible for reporting the location and types of signs installed, sign and site inspections, and sign maintenance. (See forms A and B, pages 34 and 35.) See more about maintenance on page 18.

As signs are developed and maintained, NFCT staff will manage the overall signage program (summarized in this handbook) and the contractual relationships with vendors for design services and products. NFCT staff will serve as the liaison between local committees and vendors.

Although the signs will be locally owned and maintained, as overall manager of the trail, NFCT staff reserve the right to oversee signage content and quality.

NFCT Sign Policies *

To create a trail system that has a consistent identity with signs that are well designed, installed, and maintained, the NFCT sign system follows the below policies.

- **Signs are secondary to trail maps and guides.** While signs will highlight key information, maps and guides provide detailed information.
- **Signs and printed material stress paddler safety and natural and cultural resource protection;** they also provide interpretation and explanation of natural and cultural features.
- **Signs are pleasing and appropriate to the setting,** visible yet unobtrusive on the landscape.
- **Before posting a sign, consider alternatives.** For example, information about nice views, rapids, and lunch spots are best noted in guidebooks rather than on signs that announce these features are ahead.
- **When a sign is the best tool, we use as little signage as possible to do the job.**
- **Signs posting legal prohibitions include a reference to the regulatory or statutory basis** for the prohibition.
- **Signs show distances to the nearest tenth of a mile.**
- **The NFCT Web site, www.northernforestcanoetrail.org is included on most signs.**

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail strives to:

- **Concentrate information at put-ins/take-outs** to minimize signage clutter.
- **Use positive wording** whenever possible.
- **Acknowledge partner organizations** on signs posted on their property.
- **Comply with local, state, and federal requirements** as well as the wishes of private landowners.
- **Locate signs to minimize vandalism** by passers-by.
- **Monitor and maintain signs** at least once a year for damage, disappearance, and effectiveness.
- **Post specific prohibitions** in locations with chronic problems.
- **Consult with federal, state, and local partners** about signage on federal-, state-, and town-managed lands.

* (This information draws heavily from the Appalachian Trail Conference's, *Local Management Planning Guide* and the National Park Service's *Signage Manual*.)